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## A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE CLASSICS <sup>1</sup>

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The brief paper which I am about to read is in the form of a letter. It is supposed to have been written in the year 4000 A. D., by a citizen of Timbuctoo, which at this time has become the capital of the world-republic. The writer is a teacher of English, now a dead language, and his letter is written in Bantu, which from a despised vernacular of South African tribes has risen to be the common language of the world. Addressed to his friend, the superintendent of public instruction for America, it is an answer to a request from the latter for suggestions regarding the curriculum of the secondary schools.

TIMBUCTOO, April 1, 4000.

MY DEAR PHILOSOPHER, GUIDE, AND FRIEND: You, who know so much more about the science of education than I do, surely speak in irony when you say that you will put great confidence in my judgment. I suspect you. I suspect that you are merely seeking for confirmation of your own ideas, so frequently and persuasively expressed. You want me to say that English, the greatest of the ancient languages, is the one indispensable study in the secondary schools; that there is no equivalent for it; that without it boys and girls cannot become useful men and women; that it is a necessary introduction to the study of the vernacular; that it is essential to the training of the lawyer, the doctor, and the engineer; that if it were taken out of the curriculum, the secondary schools would go to the dogs. You think because I am a professor of English I will stand by my specialty through thick and thin.

Well, I am going to surprise you. I have been studying this question for many years and have come to some very curious

<sup>1</sup> Read before the English Conference at the meeting of the Michigan Schoolmasters' Club, April 3, 1908.

conclusions. No doubt they will seem to you eccentric, perhaps nonsensical; but they are the result of my best research and reflection, and have passed into the stage of conviction. I do not expect you to agree with them, but I will ask you to listen to them as patiently as you can. Strike, but hear me.

Let me say in the first place that no one loves and admires the English language and the English literature more than I do. I have studied it all my life long. I have read its literature in its whole extent from Chaucer down to its decay and final death. I regard it as one of the most wonderful products of the human mind. No other ancient language that I am familiar with is so rich and copious in its vocabulary, so noble in its grammar, so flexible in its style, so capable of sounding all the notes in the scale of human passion, imagination, and reflection, so varied in its types of literary composition, whether in poetry or in prose. It seems to have gathered into itself the beauties, the ideas, the artistic forms, of all the older languages, just as the English race gathered into itself the thoughts and feelings and experiences of the nations that preceded it.

In all these respects it was the superior of the older languages and literatures, especially the Greek and Latin. We of this day, looking back over the history of the world for the past five thousand years, can see this clearly. We wonder at the blindness of those deluded writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and even of later centuries, who thought that English was a poor feeble creature, hardly worthy to sit at the feet of Greek and Latin.

I love this language. I think I was more fortunate than some in my introduction to it. My first teacher was an enthusiast. By some means, I hardly know what, he led me directly into the heart of this ancient tongue. While other teachers were drilling their pupils in the crazy orthography, and insisting upon the list of irregular verbs, and pointing out the peculiarities of the curious syntax, and in general building up a great barrier of grammatical rules between the pupil and the language, this man by a sudden stroke, as it were by a lightning flash, opened up to me a secret passage into the undiscovered country, and I marched in and took possession of it. I cannot describe to you the exultation, the swelling of the heart, the expansion of all my youthful energies with which I realized that I had made that conquest.

It seemed to me, to quote the words of one of the great English poets,

I was the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea.

There is one passage of Shakspeare's tremendous drama, *Macbeth*, which I cannot, at this day, read without tears. It is the simple lines of the speech of Macduff brooding over the murder of his wife and children:

I cannot but remember such things were  
That were most precious to me.

Wonderful as is the poetry and pathos of these magic words, it is not their tenderness or the dramatic power of the situation which moves me. No, it is the recollection of the eager delight, the trembling joy, with which I, a callow schoolboy, so ignorant of life, so doubtful of my powers, so blundering, so stupid, suddenly realized that I—I, too—was heir of all the ages.

For others English is a hateful name. It is associated with dull routine, with headaches and heartaches, with endless thumbing of the dictionary, with blundering and stumbling translations, with prosy or prodding task-masters. Not so with me. When I speak the word there comes back to me the scent of the lilacs in the old garden by the shining lake which once bore the name of Michigan. The locust whirs in the old apple tree above me; the shadow of the long spear of summer grass with which my tutor points the lines falls again across the page; and through it all like a strain of beautiful music sounds that plaintive cry of world-old passion and grief and tragic pathos, filling my young heart with terror and pity at the cruel law of life, and yet bringing with it a strange calm and joy and surcease of pain. And therefore, to paraphrase another poet's line, am I still a lover of the English tongue and all that pertains to it. Nay, more. It is curious how the sense for the beauty and power of this old language gives a charm to every detail of it, how it transfigures even the most commonplace things in the English grammar, how through it even the sight of the old textbooks can give (to quote my poet again) thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

You see what a sentimentalist I am about this old dead world, which lives for us now only in its printed words—for we no longer know how it was pronounced—and you will expect me to

wax eloquent in defending it against its enemies in the schools. Yes, I can do that, too. But I would praise it with discrimination. When I look back over my own progress from boyhood to manhood, and ask myself soberly what I gained from my study of English, it seems to me that one great good stands out above all the rest. I will tell you after a little what it is. First let me say that I cannot attach so much importance as you do to those things which you praised in your recent article—the mental drill from the learning of paradigms, the aid in understanding our own noble vernacular, the cultivation of memory, the increase of vocabulary, the training in expression which comes from translation from that language to our own. Many of these claims are fanciful, as anyone can see who visits the English classes of our schools and witnesses the blind gropings of teachers and pupils lost in the maze of grammatical and rhetorical details. Recently I heard a teacher expatiating on the beauties of the participial construction in Keats to a class of students for whom, so far as their feelings for the poetry were concerned, Keats's urn might as well have been a bucket of ashes. The hungry sheep looked up and were not fed. And the pity of it is that few of them will ever go any farther. Such study reminds me of mining shafts abandoned just before the vein of gold is reached. Six inches farther and they might have come upon untold wealth. As it is, all they have to show for so much hard labor is just a big dump of worthless dirt and gravel.

No, these things are secondary. In putting them in the forefront of your argument, you seem to me, if you will pardon me for saying so, to have overlooked the great end of education.

What is after all the primary thing in education? It is character. Moral courage, self-reliance, respect for the truth in every aspect of it, both material and spiritual, sympathy for our fellow-beings and an active desire to help them and co-operate with them, a love of justice and fair play, belief in democratic institutions, loyalty to our republic—these are the elements of character which our schools were, I believe, primarily established to develop. Nothing will take their place—neither knowledge, nor cleverness, nor business shrewdness, nor skill with tongue or pen, nor deftness of the hand, nor inventive genius—not even that idol of our modern civilization, success. No, character, in the widest sense of the word, is the great end of education. The

school which helps build up character is good; the school which fails to build it up is bad. Education may and should do other things, but this it must do or go down to defeat.

And when I speak of character in reference to our secondary schools, I mean the character of the adolescent on his way to become an adult. It is a commonplace to say that adolescence is the period of unrest. It is the time when the innate powers of the mind rise like waves in a storm. The voices of the great deep call to one another. The passions and impulses and ambitions which shall one day make or mar the adult character, struggle one with another for the mastery. This is the crucial period in the pupil's life. Most of the evils of education arise either from suppression and deadening of the swelling forces of adolescence, or on the other hand from the prolongation of the adolescent mood—its turbulence and lawlessness—into the years of later life. Therefore, in order to the development of a rounded and stable character, it is essential that these forces should be regulated, harmonized, conserved. Their unrestrained liberty must be submitted to law. There is need of some powerful agency which will bring home to the pupil the meaning and reality of the great law of life that freedom can be won only by the surrender of freedom, that to whatever he believe in, be it God, or humanity, or country, or abstract right, or ideals, the youth must yield himself up unreservedly, in order that having given himself to these great and good things he may in the end recover himself. This is the intellectual and emotional death and rebirth through which every youthful soul must pass if it achieves true manhood and womanhood.

For my part, to come back to my theme, I found this transforming agency in the study of English. It was my haven in the storm of passion, it was my refuge from the terrors of life. Life to me was then, in the words of an English essayist, something "monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt, and poignant." It bewildered me, it cowed me, it wounded my spirit already weary with the inner conflict. But in that old dead world, the world of Shakspeare and Wordsworth and Tennyson, that world from which the accidents, the trivialities, the carking cares have been obliterated by the hand of time, was the stillness of the ages. Its peace, its almost miraculous beauty, the winning rhythms of its poetry and prose, soothed my overwrought nerves. The con-

flicts of life seemed to be harmonized. God was in his world once more; all was right with his heaven.

This was the work which English did for me. It regulated my emotions. It restored the equilibrium of my mind. It helped to convert the wild, aimless forces of the adolescent into the regular, purposeful forces of adult character.

Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,  
These three alone lead life to sovereign power,

sings the poet. If I possess these qualities in some measure I owe them largely to my living contact with this dead language.

As I write these things I can, in imagination, see you rubbing your hands and smiling, and hear you saying, "Just what I thought. Trust this old enthusiast to commit himself. What can he say on the other side now?"

But wait, my friend; I do not mean to recant. I take none of these praises back. They are all too feeble. As I say, I love this language, I believe in it, I owe much to it. And yet when you ask about its place in secondary education generally, I wonder whether we are not making a mistake, whether we are not bartering, on even terms, gold for silver. Look at the history of education in England and America. With this unrivaled language on their tongues and this noble literature in their libraries, see with what persistence English scholars turned their eyes to those dead languages, Latin and Greek, as the foundation of their culture. I cannot refrain from quoting this beautiful passage from the inaugural address of the president of one of the American universities in the twentieth century:

The classical literatures [he means the Greek and Roman] give us, in tones and with an authentic accent we can nowhere else hear, the thoughts of an age we cannot visit. They contain airs of a time not our own, unlike our own and yet its foster parent. To these things was the modern thinking world first bred. In them speaks a time naïve, pagan, an early morning day when men looked upon the earth while it was fresh, untrodden by crowding thought, an age when the mind moved as it were without prepossessions and with an unsophisticated, childlike curiosity, a season apart, during which those seats upon the Mediterranean seem the first seats of thoughtful men. We shall not anywhere else get a substitute for it. The modern mind has been built upon that culture and there is no authentic equivalent.

This was a noble profession of faith by a wise man and famous educator. Yet it rings oddly in the ears of us of today,

does it not? No equivalent! No waters to sail in save the Mediterranean when all about him undulated the waves of that great Atlantic of literature. And are we not making the same mistake? We also have developed a language and a literature. It sprang, to be sure, from a mean origin; but we must remember that Tuscan before the time of Dante was but a dialect of Italy, that English itself was once a despised vernacular that at the Norman Conquest seemed in a fair way to be displaced by the language of the conquerors. It is true that our tongue is very different in its structure from the English tongue. What would the educators of the twentieth century have said of a speech in which there were no nouns, no verbs, no prepositions, no conjunctions, in fact, no distinct parts of speech as the English understood them? Such is the character of our language, and it has on this account been called a grammarless tongue and has been disparaged by comparison with the ancient languages. And yet we find it adequate for the expression and communication of all our ideas and emotions. Nay, more, at the hands of great poets and prose writers it has developed a rich and powerful literature. I do not hesitate to say that, as a medium both for the daily business of life and for literary composition, it rises as far above English as English rose above Greek and Latin. It is richer, more copious, more splendid. "The thoughts of man are widened with the process of the suns," an English poet once said. How true that has been in the past few hundred years, and how grandly has the river of our speech widened to receive these swelling thoughts and to bear them on to future generations! But history repeats itself. With this living speech on our tongues and this unrivaled literature on our library shelves, we turn the faces of our children to the symbols of a dead past. For a large part of their educational life, at the most impressionable period, at least the most formative period, we force them to give their best energies, I will not say to a mastery of these symbols—for few achieve that—but to a hand-to-hand fight with them, in which the pupil usually comes off second-best.

I know how you will meet this argument, or rather this conviction, for I am not pretending to argue. You will say that this same dead language, English, is valuable to us just because it is dead. Let me quote your own words. You say in your last report:



How fortunate for us that in the remains of English literature we possess a language precipitated, crystallized, fixed in beautiful forms which cannot greatly alter. If they do change somewhat in the progress of classical scholarship, as we learn to know them better, the change does not affect the stability of the types; their progress, if such it can be called, is like that of great Alpine glaciers moving imperceptibly in their beds. The living language, on the other hand, is fluent, plastic, Protean. Its character changes even as we speak, new words and forms continually arising, old words incessantly taking on new meanings, the body of the language quivering with life and sensitively responding to every wave of thought, the whole contour of the language changing from year to year with the inrush of fresh literary production. Such a language is at once too intimate and too elusive. Its mutability is disconcerting. One knows not where to lay hold of it. There is a vagrancy in its very laws and principles. Only a language which has ceased to pulsate with the energy of life, which has passed into a state of life in death, as it were, is fitted to become a perfect instrument of education.

Once I should have said a hearty amen to that, but now I am not so sure. Is it, after all, the deadness of the language that makes it a good instrument for education? Is it not rather because by serious study of it and prolonged absorption in it, and especially by learning its value as the expression of the national life—is it not, I say, because by this means we have got into the very heart of it? That is my view, at any rate.

And now suppose that it were possible for us to do the same thing with our own language. Imagine that one has by some magic art penetrated to the very center of this great living organism, where one can perceive and understand the source of its energy, that one sees as it were in a vision, the streams of power running out to the ends of the earth, binding men together, driving them on to generous deeds, uplifting their hearts, making them laugh, making them cry, revealing to them their inmost unsuspected thoughts, opening up to them the secrets of the universe, disclosing to them the laws of their own action, drawing them together into a common brotherhood. Would not this revelation of the power of a living speech be the authentic equivalent of a petrified and crystallized language and literature? Might it not be more than an equivalent? Could this be done for our young people, I am tempted to say that the results would be more beneficial than those which flow from the best teaching of English. For who can doubt that it is better to travel oneself

than to read guidebooks, better to eat bread than to listen to lectures on bread-making?

You will perhaps expect of me that I shall at this point bring forward some novel, profound, far-reaching philological doctrine, which, reconstructing the theory of our native language and literature and furnishing a basis for a new method of teaching, will present a substitute for the classics. I regret most bitterly that I have no such discovery in reserve. The Copernicus in this field of education is still to come. Perhaps he is not yet born, or if born he is still a freckle-faced lad in knickerbockers going with shining morning face unwillingly to one of the ward schools of Timbuctoo. Be that as it may, that he will come in due time I am very confident. And while we are waiting for him, we may, for the amusement of his leisure hours when he has become a man, endeavor to forecast the direction of his speculations.

Of one thing we may be sure. Our future guide in education will find his starting-point in the pupil's own interest in language. To begin with what we know to be true and what we feel to be valid and compelling for us, is surely sound educational doctrine in this or any other field. Every pupil uses his own language, every pupil is witness to the power of his own words upon his fellow-pupils. To reveal to him the effectiveness of the tools which he already knows how to use and to show him how to sharpen them and use them more effectively, is the language teacher's first task. I might say that it is the teacher's whole task, for what more is there to do than to go straight on in the same direction, cultivating more power and realization of power as long as education lasts? We call this training in composition. How deadly dull it is for some! And yet, if teacher and pupil can somehow be brought to conceive of it as growth in power to do the world's work, I do not see why it should not be one of the most inspiring of all studies. I do not see indeed why it should not give zest to the driest details of grammar. Once let the great light shine through these little things and

All the dry dead impracticable stuff  
Starts into life and light again; this world  
Pervaded by the influx from the next.

When I was a boy my greatest ambition was to throw the switch at the great falls of the Nile which supply electricity

to this continent. In imagination I could see the electric impulse rushing through the ether in every direction in countless waves, turning ten thousand wheels, lighting a million lamps in far-distant houses, driving railway trains up mountain sides, sending airships hurtling through space, raising tons of ore from deep mining shafts. But how puerile was such an ambition compared with that which anyone can realize who cultivates his mother-tongue. What power of the electric fluid can rival that of the printed or spoken word which, thrown into the mental ether, starts vibrations that roll on forever? What is the lighting of lamps or the driving of railway trains to the illuminating of minds or the stimulation of generous emotions in our fellow-beings?

This is what the dead languages once did for the nations who are dead. It is because they did this work that they are so great and beautiful in their remains. But our language is doing it every day, could we but realize it and make our pupils realize it. Must we wait until it is dead before we enter into our possession of it?

Such are my fond speculations, at which you may laugh as much as you choose. I admit that they are fanciful. At any rate they cannot easily be molded into one of those neat little outlines of courses which you send out from your office year after year to a million teachers throughout the world. But not every good idea in education will go into an outline. And besides I am not reckoning with the present but forecasting the future, when my hypothetical schoolboy will have come into his kingdom. Set me down for a dreamer of dreams if you will. I shall be half inclined to agree with you. And yet when I look far into the future, I seem, if I may quote again, to see

The point of one white star . . . quivering still  
Deep in the orange light of widening morn  
Beyond the purple mountains.

That is my star of hope. I shall not live to see it grow into the light of the world, nor will you. But our schoolboy may. I envy him his youth.